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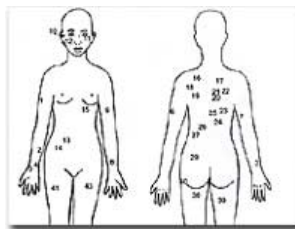
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Witchcraft and the 'missing' report

By Dominic Casciani
BBC News community affairs

Last year, stories emerged that African preachers were sacrificing children in secret church ceremonies in the UK. Today, we still don't know the full truth behind those claims - and African churches say the government isn't doing more to help them root out child abusers posing as Christian leaders.



Abuse: A police diagram of injuries inflicted to "Child B"

No one who last June heard the story of "Child B" would have failed to have been moved.

The eight-year-old child, brought to the UK from Angola, was beaten, cut and had chilli rubbed in her eyes after her aunt and two others believed she was a witch.

The girl's aunt, who cannot be named for legal reasons, and two others, Sita Kisanga and Sebastian Pinto, were jailed - but the case sparked widespread fears over whether a new form of child abuse centred on African "healing" customs had arrived in Britain.

Child B was not the first such child abuse case to emerge from African communities. The appalling death of Victoria Climbié in February 2000 included an element of belief in possession and witchcraft. Separately, police are still investigating the identity of "Adam", the torso of a Nigerian boy found in 2001.

And amid these terrible stories, and fears of others, there remains enormous confusion over the extent of the problem.

A Metropolitan Police report last year suggested that abuse linked to churches was rife. That report largely detailed hearsay, claims and community fears and was intended to help police officers target their efforts. But some campaigners accused the authors of a "racist witch-hunt" against African communities.

And so, a year on, nobody is nearer the truth. Except perhaps for the Department for Education and Skills (DFES).

At a conference on Monday, leaders of Congolese churches in Britain are calling on ministers to urgently publish research they commissioned into the allegations of witchcraft and possession.

The research is understood to have



“ We feel hurt by this - it's as if we have been demonised and put outside the mainstream Christian

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been completed and is sitting on a desk somewhere in the department.

A spokesman for the DFES, which has responsibility for child protection policy, says it is being considered by ministers, but will give no publication date, despite widespread expectations that it would have been released in March. Recently revised guidelines from the department do however underline that faith groups should have child protection policies in place.

Agu Irukwu is the lead pastor at Jesus House in north London, one of the largest African-led Pentecostal churches in Britain. He says uncertainty over the allegations - and absence of the government's findings, is undermining an entire community that now feels labelled child abusers.

"It is extremely important to have this research published," said Pastor Irukwu, one of the organisers of Monday's conference on combating allegations of the occult within the British African diaspora.

"We don't know the truth and real extent of what we are dealing with, and rumours are beginning to run rife. We are concerned that unless the government handles this wisely, it could in fact drive a wedge between black-majority churches and the wider society, particularly when the newer churches are beginning to make their contributions in addressing some of society's problems.

"We want to help to facilitate positive steps towards finding and applying meaningful solutions, but we cannot do so if the government does not consult with us adequately."

Widespread problem?

African churches are the fastest growing sector of Christianity in Britain, not least because of growth of the communities themselves.

Many of these new communities have developed in vulnerable circumstances - almost all of the estimated 20,000 Congolese in the UK arrived as asylum seekers and refugees - and the popular churches are part of networks that provide support to the beleaguered amid uncertainty.

But at the same time, other entirely separate beliefs are present in the UK which, according to experts, masquerade as Christianity and prey on the most alienated and isolated members of society.

Parts of London with large African populations are regularly leafleted by traditional "spiritual healers" calling themselves "Doctor" or "Professor".

Some of these healers, who also advertise in the African media, say they can tackle "black magic" - although most claim to be experts in little more than broken relationships.

But according to experts it is within this world of fearful fragile communities that "healers" who go beyond the Christian concepts of possession and exorcism have been plying their trade. Some of them are presenting themselves as upstanding Christian leaders in order to gain power and influence.

David Pearson of the Churches Child Protection Advisory Service, an expert body which connects faith groups to authorities, says that he has found Congolese church leaders looking for all the support they can get in rooting out these healers.

In the wake of the 2005 allegations,

fellowship, as if we are not being recognised as proper Christians

Pastor Jean Bosco

Congolese Christians
'demonised'

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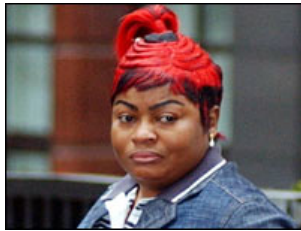
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" ... Overpowers witchcraft ... I can try to help you break the powers of Black Magic cast on you and help prevent you from becoming a victim ... he will help you with protection against enemies, exorcism, no false hope ... I know the most powerful spells - I can cure people of evil forces and witchcraft ..."

Excerpts from leaflets from some spiritual healers operating in London

Mr Pearson's organisation, backed by the Metropolitan Police, met Congolese pastors about professional child protection training.

They agreed an initial plan to train 60 pastors in London this spring. Such has been the community's concerns, some 230 churchmen signed up for the course in how to spot child abuse.



Sita Kisanga: Convicted of aiding and abetting cruelty to "Child B"

"These are relatively new communities and many of them don't speak English as a first language," he says.

"They were already feeling alienated - and what they told us was that they felt excluded from society - but very much wanted to be part of it.

"The child sacrifice allegations have alienated them even further because they have all been tarred with the same brush."

Cases in context

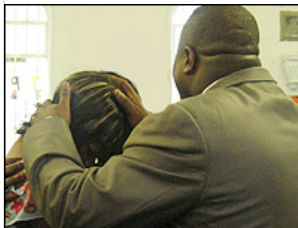
But Detective Inspector Bob Pull of the Metropolitan Police does not underestimate the complexity of the problems faced by both communities and the authorities.

Insp Bull, who is also a Christian pastor, is a member of Project Violet, the Met's unit investigating faith-related child abuse.

Of the 42,000 child abuse allegations the Met has dealt with in the past five years, 52 of them were related to allegations against African spiritualists offering "deliverance" from possession. Eight of these have ended up in court, although other investigations resulted in action by social services.

Insp Bull says that much of his work has involved working with Congolese and Angolan church leaders to educate the vulnerable in how to quickly identify behaviour that should not be part of a Christian ministry.

EXORCISM AND CULTURE



"We know that ndoki does exist - back home and everywhere else too there are people who are used by the devil to bring a curse or bad luck to other people's lives, even to kill them"

Pastor Modeste Muyulu

'Exorcism is part of our culture'

"There is a section of society that has got so much respect for pastors [as community leaders] that some of these figures have got too much authority and power," says Insp Bull.

"We [police and bona fide African churches] are working together to challenge them on their theology - when someone quotes the Bible at me, I can quote it back at them."

"I have been encouraged by the people I am working with - the amount of time they have spent talking to the police and others is a really significant shift in terms of the community's involvement.

"But I'm not naive - there are individuals within the communities who will disregard what [Christian leaders] say and still be involved in child abuse.

"But let's be clear, there is no excuse for child abuse in any context which is why we are working with the communities to both educate and enforce the law."

Add your comments on this story, using the form below.

We need to take seriously allegations of abuse, and ensure that safeguards are in place to protect some of the most vulnerable in society, but we also need to remember what the Bible says to Christians about our fight being against the forces of evil (Ephesians 6.12). It is only with God's power and by his strength alone that we must be prepared to stand against evil in whatever guise we find it.

Christopher Pix, London

Thank you for this article, which was informative and was careful not to demonize those who are doing no wrong. I'm sure we all hope that an end is put to child abuse by wolves in sheep's clothing.

rachel, London, UK

Our country, the DRC and its people have been subjected to poverty for more than 5 decades now. Someone may read the history of this beautiful country and will understand the new "phenomenon" of these Congolese churches. It is well known that poverty makes people look for ways to get out of the situation. Using fear to generate faith is a well known tactic used during the rule of President Mobutu Sese Seko to control the Congolese people. Faith subjects people to your authority, then you get power, of course money. Considering our cultural history, no better way to spread fear among the Congolese people than to tell them that there is a "KINDOKO" (evil spirit) somewhere. The UK government and police should open an investigation on those churches and not allow that those small dictators like Mobutu continue to exploit people in the UK soil, because this is not less than sequestering people in the name of free religion. Members of those churches are only vulnerable Congolese refugees who are being used and deserve to live free without fear.

Patrick, Oslo, Norway

Exorcism is itself a form of psychological abuse, rooted in pre-scientific superstitions about demons and spirit possession. The problem is within Christianity, not outside it, and will not begin to go away until exorcism is legislated against and rooted out.

Richard Moore, York, UK

What I think would be interesting to know, is how many of the children who have been the subject of 'exorcisms' have disabilities such as epilepsy and mental health issues?

Michelle Valentine, Manchester, UK

Is it really a good idea to set a Pastor (believes in an invisible sky-fairy) to investigate superstition (ndoki)? Should pastors be trained to 'spot the signs' of abuse? Isn't that teaching some of them how to hide the signs of abuse? Policing, of all kinds, should be purely secular.

John Flemming, Scunthorpe

This looks to be another case of a small minority of immigrants ruining things for the majority. Don't think I can say and more that hasn't already been said

Chris Davis,

How do you distinguish between one interpretation of Christian dogma and another? Surely child sacrifice, as abhorrent as it is to enlightenment values, is an integral part of Christian worship, as it was often demanded by the Christian God? Who gets to decide which parts of the Bible are relevant? Whites only? The outlawing of the maltreatment and abuse of children is a result of enlightenment values not Christianity. It is a human triumph over religion not the other way around.

Bill, Glasgow

From the article - "Of the 42,000 child abuse allegations the Met has dealt with in the past five years, 52 of them were related to allegations against African spiritualists offering "deliverance" from possession". This means that 0.123% of ALL child abuse cases handled by the Met in the past five years were related to African spiritualists. I'm not suggesting that we should disregard these cases but I think that these cases are getting a disproportionate amount of media coverage. Why is this? Simple answer: it involves Africans.

Akin Akinsete, London

These false prophets are capitalising on the POVERTY of MANY AFRICANS by pretending to be exorcists and devil chasers. This has nothing to do with freedom of worship so our African and World regulators MUST clamp down on these wild "born-again churches" springing up in D.R. Congo, Angola, Southern Nigeria, Uganda and Kenya, to name a few! Those seeking AUTHENTIC and PROGRESSIVE African VOODOO remedies should look at Ghana and Benin!

Bakr Emman, Hamburg, Germany

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